

DISCOURSE TECH

The dark side of the Shroom Boom

They were promised psychedelic healing. They say it brought them more pain.



Deena So Oteh for BI

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Tim, a doctor in Atlanta, was reviewing new clinical research into psilocybin when he decided to try shrooms for himself. A hallucinogen derived from mushrooms, psilocybin was making its way through the drug approval process, and medical professionals viewed its mind-and mood-altering properties as a promising treatment for everything from PTSD to end-of-life anxiety. Tim was hoping to get more involved in the emerging field of psychedelic medicine. "If I'm going to operate this roller coaster," he recalls thinking, "I should ride it at least once so I know what it's like."

To take his first dose of mushrooms, Tim went to the EAST Institute, an organization in Atlanta that described itself as a center for psychedelic healing. Run by a local tech founder named Jeff Glattstein and his wife, Lena Franklin, a social worker and Yoga Magazine cover star, EAST promoted "personal healing and transformation" through a combination of plant medicine, meditation, and "vibrational sound therapy." Similar facilities have been sprouting up across the country, part of an entrepreneurial shroom boom spurred by the growing movement to legalize psilocybin for use in therapeutic settings, and a belief that these drugs could be the future of mental health treatment.

Tim found his first trip, in 2022, life-altering. It helped him let go of his feelings of shame about his sexuality and to heal the trauma from a sexual assault he had suffered years earlier. "It sounds trite, but I felt so connected to everything," he recalls. "I felt this light burst out from me in the form of these rainbow bullets. They pushed the predator away. I felt bathed in this light and energy and power that was simply beyond my own agency, beyond my own personal narrative, and beyond my own body."

Toward the end of the session, Tim looked over at Glattstein, who'd been facilitating the trip. In his 60s, wearing a woven poncho and a dazzling array of giant turquoise rings, the older man struck Tim as a guru, a healer who could deliver him from his guilt and pain. Still experiencing the trip's euphoric afterglow, he dubbed Glattstein the Light Keeper. "I was ready to latch on to a savior at that moment," Tim recalls. (He and other trainees spoke on the condition that they be identified with pseudonyms, since they could suffer professional consequences for using illegal drugs outside a clinical setting. Glattstein declined to comment for this story.)

To get a head start in the exciting new field of hallucinogenic healing, Tim paid \$25,000 to enroll in EAST's signature offering: a six-month course to train students to serve as facilitators of psilocybin-assisted therapy. During the sessions — which included weekend ceremonies in which trainees would take turns tripping on high doses of mushrooms — Tim developed what he called an "eternal bond" with his fellow students and EAST's staff. He imagined a future where they would all take care of one another's children. ("It was the mushrooms talking, of course," he says.)

Halfway through the training, Tim's personal life imploded when his boyfriend of four years broke up with him. In his fragile state, he told two EAST employees that he thought he should take the weekend off from taking mushrooms. But when Glattstein handed him a high dose, Tim says, he took it. "There was always this feeling that they must know something I don't know," he says.

Centers for psychedelic medicine, part of an entrepreneurial shroom boom, have been sprouting up across the country. The market for psychedelic medicine could hit \$10 billion by 2028. Deena So Oteh for BI

Later that night, and while he was still under the influence of the mushrooms, Tim says he was sexually assaulted by Scott, an EAST staff member responsible for ensuring that trainees got home safely from the ceremony. (Business Insider is referring to him by a pseudonym; he was never criminally charged. He denies Tim's allegation.)

Tim says he hoped to work with EAST to develop an ethics policy and roll out better safeguards. He set up a Zoom meeting with Glattstein and Franklin, and asked two of his closest confidants in the training council, Beth and Lisa, to join the call. "I knew I had been taken advantage of by someone who was supposed to take care of me," says Tim. "I was very concerned with ensuring something like this didn't happen again."

Initially, according to an audio recording of the meeting reviewed by Business Insider, the two founders said they "believed" Tim. But when Beth suggested that the incident represented an institutional failure at EAST, Glattstein jumped in. "As far as EAST being culpable," he said, "we had a person on our staff who stepped over the line."

Glattstein and Franklin hired a law firm to conduct an independent investigation, and Scott was ultimately fired. Franklin declined to share the resulting report with Business Insider. But in an email to the council, she wrote that the report concluded that EAST had "no culpability in the alleged events."

This is a new field, and there are no real regulations. It's sort of the Wild West phenomenon where the most kind of aggressive, entrepreneurial people can take advantage of that.

- Dominic Sisti, an associate professor of medical ethics at the University of Pennsylvania

But things at EAST were about to get even more complicated, as multiple women came forward to accuse Glattstein of touching them inappropriately during healing sessions — accusations he denies. And such accusations aren't isolated to EAST.

Over the past few years, as drugs like MDMA and mushrooms have turned into a lucrative business, accusations of abuse have begun to surface at a host of leading centers for psychedelic medicine. In the wake of decriminalizing psilocybin, cities and states have implemented few ground rules to govern the sudden explosion of "consciousness medicine." And the same properties that make mushrooms so effective in repelling destructive thoughts can also render users highly suggestible, making them vulnerable to the cultlike dynamic that has long pervaded the world of psychedelic healing. As a result, a growing number of people who have signed up to get care or serve as caregivers in the budding new industry say they've been harmed while taking the very drugs whose healing powers they were being taught to harness.

"This is a new field, and there are no real regulations," says Dominic Sisti, an associate professor of medical ethics at the University of Pennsylvania who has researched the ethical dilemmas involved in psychedelics. "It's sort of the Wild West phenomenon where the most kind of aggressive, entrepreneurial people can take advantage of that."

Humans have been getting high on magic mushrooms for almost as long as there have been humans. Popularized in the United States during the 1960s, psychedelics came under fire during the Nixon administration's "war on drugs." In 1970, they were classified as Schedule 1 substances, rendering possession illegal, even for research purposes.

Then, in 2000, scientists at Johns Hopkins University received permission from the Food and Drug Administration to conduct research into psilocybin. As studies began to show that the substance had significant benefits for patients with chronic mental illness, voters started to see it more as medicine than menace. From Burning Man to luxury retreats, experimenting with psychedelics has become common among tech founders and executives like Elon Musk and Sam Altman, who credit the drugs with quieting their nerves, boosting productivity, and allowing them to better harness their creativity. The global market for psychedelic medicine could hit \$10 billion by 2028, according to the Business Research Company.

Oregon and Colorado have legalized psilocybin for therapeutic use, and more than 20 cities have decriminalized it. With the hope that federal regulators will follow suit, venture capital firms have been financing shroom startups, and scores of training programs have sprung up to meet the growing demand for psychedelic facilitators who can administer the drugs in a safe environment. In the San Francisco area, where psychedelics have a long and checkered history, at least six training programs now operate, even though psilocybin remains illegal for medicinal use.

Regulations have not changed with the psychedelic gold rush. In Oregon, there's little government or medical oversight of the 20 training programs authorized by the state. Those certified to administer psychedelics are required to receive 160 hours of training — compared with the 625 hours mandated for licensed massage therapists.

Franklin had an aesthetic perfectly suited to psychedelic medicine in the Instagram era. Glattstein, once a tech entrepreneur, had reinvented himself as a shaman.

EAST — short for Entheogenic Assisted Spiritual Transformation — was founded in the fall of 2021. Located on the ground floor of an office park in northwest Atlanta, its ceremonial space had the look of an ashram outfitted from an Anthropologie catalog. White sheepskin rugs were arranged in a circle; Buddhist statues adorned an altar lined with candles and a large geode. The veneer of curated calm was periodically pierced by the racket coming from Insight Virtual Ballistics, a bar and "virtual shooting" arcade next door.

The initial draw for many of the trainees at EAST was Franklin, who ran a therapy and mindfulness business in Atlanta before meeting Glattstein. An ethereal beauty with long, dark hair and a radiant smile, Franklin has an aesthetic perfectly suited to psychedelic medicine in the Instagram era. Her look — a seemingly endless rotation of hand-dyed silk dresses and turquoise jewelry — was at least partially attainable: A gift shop in EAST's entryway sold brightly hued dresses and robes for hundreds of dollars a pop.

If Franklin, 40, was the draw, it was Glattstein, 65, who ran the show. He spent years in the up-and-down world of tech startups. In 1997, he cofounded an internet services company called Virtual Resources that raised \$25 million in venture capital, only to sell for \$6 million two years later. In 2018, after several subsequent startups also flopped, Glattstein turned the page. Instead of pitching companies, he was now pitching his own rebirth.

The story, as he's told it in various interviews, is that he had fallen terribly ill — with what, he doesn't say — and despite being given "all of the Western medical treatments, all the therapies, all the drugs," his mysterious condition only got worse. "They had given me three months to live," he recounted on the "Psychedelic Conversations" podcast. "All my systems were shutting down."

All that changed, he said, when he heard a voice command him, "Heal yourself." Glattstein says he stopped his medications, cut ties with his doctors, and started practicing with a shaman. His hair grew back and his body grew fit: His illness was gone. He started teaching, and Franklin was one of his early students. The two became a couple, bound by a passion for Eastern medicine and, they've said, their shared feeling as outsiders in Atlanta — Glattstein, the child of New York Jews in a predominantly Southern Baptist area; Franklin, whose mother was Vietnamese. They soon began hosting mini "medicine" retreats with friends at a cabin in the woods outside Atlanta. "It was just a small group of us doing mushrooms," said a friend who asked not to be identified for fear of professional repercussions.

After founding EAST, Glattstein and Franklin proved to be gifted promoters of their new venture. Latching on to reality TV as a pulpit for their psychedelic gospel, they appeared as spiritual healers on Lifetime's "Little Women: Atlanta" and Bravo's "Real Housewives of Atlanta" spinoff, "Porsha's Family Matters." They trademarked the "EAST Method," which they said provided "profound healing benefits for depression, anxiety, PTSD, addiction, compulsive conditions, pain management, and end-of-life demoralization" — though it's never been proven to be a treatment for any condition.

Once they welcomed their first "council" of facilitator trainees, Glattstein — now calling himself a "world-renowned shaman" — took on the roles of teaching classes, sourcing the medicine, and setting the dos

Before long, Glattstein was surrounded by a following of true believers. His supreme self-confidence, Beth says, made it hard to resist his instructions. "There were moments where I did feel connected to him," she says, "because of the drugs."

On ceremony weekends at EAST, Friday and Saturday nights were reserved for psilocybin "journeys." On the first night, half of the council would take a high dose of mushrooms of up to 4.5 grams, according to six of the trainees. The other half would be given a relatively low dose, up to 1.5 grams, so they could help facilitate the others' experiences, they say. Franklin says that the doses were lower: 3.5 grams "was at a much higher end," she told Business Insider, while the low dose would be "up to one gram."

The next night, they'd swap roles. As the students waited for the drugs to take effect, Franklin and the other lead facilitators would don dresses and ceremonial robes, play music, and dance.

"I will always regret not saying, 'Wait a minute, Jeff, she's telling you that her intuition, her body, her spirit, is saying that she shouldn't do this. Why would we override that? We're here to learn how to be facilitators.'"

The next day, the trainees would talk about their experiences from the night before. Glattstein would also lead sessions on topics like neuroscience and shamanic healing. The trainees, some of them healthcare professionals, said they found the lectures light on science. "Jeff gave some very basic information about the limbic system," recalls Sarah, a trainee in the third council. "I was like, 'Are we not going to get into serotonin receptors and how psychedelics interact with the brain?'" There was also no discussion about the boundaries between the facilitator and the subject, trainees say. "There was never anything about ethics, or what we should do as facilitators if we found ourselves attracted to somebody who was doing the medicine work with us," says Beth.

As psychedelics move into the fields of medicine and therapy, the training in how to handle them is, in many cases, being conducted by spiritual healers who are intensely critical of Western medicine. Trainees say Glattstein could be openly hostile to the medical establishment. Zoe, a former employee of EAST, says she started to see a shift in the center's attitude that she wasn't comfortable with. "Their messaging was becoming increasingly, explicitly anti-mental-health treatment," she says. "Like, how you shouldn't go to therapy, and take mushrooms instead."

At one ceremony in February 2023, a psychologist named Joan, who was part of Tim's council, was experiencing what she described as "serious insomnia and unrelenting anxiety." She says she asked Glattstein if she could skip the mushrooms that weekend and stick to facilitating. But Joan says Glattstein insisted she go ahead with the ceremony as planned, and she ultimately agreed. Two trainees recalled the interaction and say they wish they'd spoken up for Joan at the time. "I will always regret not saying, 'Wait a minute, Jeff, she's telling you that her intuition, her body, her spirit, is saying that she shouldn't do this,'" says Beth. "Why would we override that? We're here to learn how to be facilitators."

Franklin says she knew Joan was struggling, but denies Glattstein pressured her to take mushrooms. As the course progressed, Joan's symptoms got worse. By the time it was over, she was a wreck. "I couldn't sleep. I couldn't work," she says. "I stopped doing pretty much anything." Her husband admitted her to the hospital, and she remained in the psych ward for two weeks.

The same weekend that Joan asked to skip the mushrooms, Tim also tried to scale back his dosage after his bad breakup. Ahead of the ceremony, he says he went to two of EAST's employees, one of whom was Scott, and told them, "It may not be appropriate for me to take a high dose of psilocybin this weekend." When Glattstein proceeded as normal, Tim agreed to take the high dose. He remembers his trip that night as healing, helping him to view the breakup as "just a blip in our cosmic story." He was filled with a sense of "overwhelming love" for his ex, and was certain they would meet again in future lives. As the ceremony wound down, Tim was still tripping.

Trainees say this was a common issue at EAST. The medicine ceremonies ended after three hours, and the effects of a high dose of psilocybin might last up to eight hours. It took so long to come down that trainees would make arrangements for someone to drive them home.

Tim came to believe that EAST had taken his money and put him in the care of someone who took advantage of him while he was in a suggestible state. Deena So Oteh for BI

Tim and Scott knew each other from years earlier, when they'd gone on a few dates, but both say it never turned sexual. That night, Scott was already due to give Tim a ride home from the ceremony, along with another trainee who was staying at Scott's home that weekend. Now, Tim says that Scott suggested Tim stay over, too. Wouldn't that be better, he said, than returning to the home Tim shared with his ex-boyfriend?

Oh, Tim thought as he stared out the window, gazing at the passing lights amplified by the psilocybin. *How lovely that this person would offer me a place to sleep.* After several months of psilocybin use, he felt a deep affection for everyone involved with EAST, including Scott.

Since the other trainee would be staying on the couch, Tim says Scott suggested that they could share his bed. (The other trainee did not respond to requests for comment.) Still feeling the effects of the psilocybin, Tim agreed. But as Scott crawled into bed with him, the feeling of love and connection Tim had felt on the ride home dissolved into confusion.

He "kind of turned into this archetype of a tiger," Tim recalls, "with the growling and these half-closed eyes." As Tim recalls it, Scott tried to undress him and physically force him to perform oral sex. "I put my underwear back on at least three times," Tim says. Finally, Tim says he gave up trying to resist.

In a telephone interview with Business Insider, Scott denied having "any sexual contact" with Tim.

According to Tim, they wound up having one more sexual encounter with another man, though Scott says he was present but didn't participate. Business Insider has reviewed text messages between Tim and Scott, in which they exchanged friendly banter and, on one occasion, Scott sent Tim an explicit photo.

A few months after the alleged assault, and after Tim had opened up to his therapist, Tim says he came to believe that EAST had taken his money and put him in the care of someone who took advantage of him while he was in a suggestible state.

In retrospect, he puts much of the blame for what happened on Glattstein and Franklin. After all, they were the ones who put Scott in charge of getting him home safely. "How," he began to wonder, "are these people running a training program?"

The lack of clear guidelines is a widespread problem in facilitator training. The gold standard for centers like EAST is a manual developed by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, the country's leading psychedelic and research advocacy organization. But the guidelines provided by MAPS are murky at best. For example, the manual states that facilitators must "always ask for permission regarding any kind of physical contact." The guidelines don't address the fact that a person under the influence of psychedelics may not be in a position to consent.

Suggesting physical contact with someone who is on psychedelic drugs, by its very nature, fosters an environment that is ripe for abuse. "It goes against everything we know about therapeutic boundaries and ethics when the facilitator or therapist leans heavily into touch," says Neşe Devenot, a researcher at the Project on Psychedelics Law and Regulation at Harvard. "And when the client is on these suggestible substances, that touch creates a feeling of intimacy that can be exploited."

Betty Aldworth, the director of communications and education at MAPS, said the organization's guidelines are clear. She says the MAPS manual stresses that touch is optional and that consent for touch can be revoked at any time and in different ways, including nonverbally. She added that proper training and sound clinical judgment are crucial to the process.

200 psychedelic practitioners and advocates have signed an open letter calling for accountability and transparency in the psychedelic community.

In 2019, MAPS acknowledged that Richard Yensen, an unlicensed therapist in one of its clinical trials, "substantially deviated" from its manual while treating Meaghan Buisson, a trial participant who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder stemming in part from sexual abuse. Video footage of the treatment showed Yensen and another therapist cuddling, hugging, and aggressively restraining Buisson while she was on MDMA. In a lawsuit, Buisson alleges that following the treatment, Yensen continued to act as her therapist and repeatedly sexually abused her for more than a year after the initial incident. After Buisson sued him for sexual abuse, Yensen argued in a legal filing that the relationship was consensual and, because his therapy license had lapsed, he was not under a "duty of care" as a medical professional. The case was settled out of court.

In 2022, California's Board of Behavioral Science brought eight "causes for discipline" against Eyal Goren, a therapist who trained with the Center for Consciousness Medicine. The claims included sexual misconduct, gross negligence, and emotional harm against trainees who had taken psilocybin, MDMA, and ayahuasca. Goren denied the allegations, but agreed to surrender his license for at least three years. Goren declined to comment.

In 2021, 200 psychedelic practitioners and advocates signed an open letter calling for accountability and transparency in the psychedelic community. A healthcare blog published by Harvard Law School, and co-authored by Devenot, concluded that the accounts of abuse throughout the rapidly growing ecosystem of psychedelic medicine "align with the familiar social dynamics that make up destructive cults."

Franklin says EAST did consider ethics when setting up the program, but she concedes they could have done more. "EAST was not perfect, obviously, and there's a lot of growth area for sure," she says. "But we definitely did our best." Still, she adds, the institute can't be blamed for what happened outside its training. "What people did when they stepped outside of the doors, we just don't have control over that," she says.

Members of Tim's council were shell-shocked by his allegations. As they debated what to do, more allegations surfaced — this time about Glattstein. In October 2023, two women from EAST's first facilitator training sued Glattstein, alleging that he had sexually abused them during private "energy healing" sessions. One of the women, Mica Davis, said Glattstein would touch her breasts and vagina over her clothing, ostensibly to help clear her "root chakra" — energy that resides in the groin area. Doing so, he told her, would "make her husband happy." The second woman, Jacqueline Wigder, who had come to EAST in part to work through trauma stemming from childhood sexual abuse, said that Glattstein would press his hands on her pubic bone and reach under her bra to run his hands between her breasts. Her sexual energy, he allegedly told her, was "like a caged tiger that needed to be released."

Glattstein and EAST have denied the allegations. In a blog post on his personal website, Glattstein says the women signed informed consents specifically for "hands on" energy work. "The reputation of an incredibly gifted healer that has dedicated his life to helping humanity was severely damaged," he wrote. The case is still pending.

In December, EAST filed for bankruptcy. The EAST website is now blank, and all posts have been deleted from the group's social media accounts. Franklin, meanwhile, has migrated some of EAST's offerings to her personal website. Earlier this year, she offered a six-day trip to Egypt called "The Awakening," which she advertised as a "reclamation journey of the powerful Priestess within" that will unlock "dormant cellular DNA." Today, she says, her goal is "to share what it really means to be an impactful, courageous, conscious leader in the healing and psychedelic spaces."

As for Tim, he hopes for a day when psilocybin therapy is fully professionalized, with credentials and oversight boards. In a sense, it's not that different from the process that Western medicine underwent at the turn of the 20th century. Back then, medical schools were required to implement standardized curricula and training requirements to counteract widespread public dissatisfaction over snake-oil salesmen and other medical "quacks." Properly regulated, Tim believes, shrooms and other psychedelics could one day be as commonplace as talk therapy — a trusted treatment for the traumas and anxieties of modern life. Getting there will mean establishing appropriate boundaries between patients and practitioners, ensuring proper oversight, and moving beyond the field's anything-goes roots in the New Age counterculture.

"I still believe this is the future of medicine," Tim says. "But you can't just have some tech guy walk in and call himself a shaman."

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